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ABSTRACT

Impressions, observations, and conclusions about the conference on the teaching of English at the University of York in England are given in this brief report. Among the conclusions reached by the British and American participants are: (1) of primary and immediate importance is the construction of a model for organizing effective language-centered English programs; (2) another primary concern is the need to consider the influence of social change, cultural attitudes, and racial and class distinctions on education; and (3) qualities such as freedom of student choice, shared learning experiences, teacher guidance rather than teacher direction, emphasis on learning rather than teaching, and a vastly increased range of "acceptable" materials and activities are characteristics of a desirable English program, but the problems of specification and implementation remain. (DB)

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Report from York

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Local, regional, and national conferences on the teaching of English occur with the frequency of four letter words at a protest rally and still manage to involve only a handful of practicing English teachers. To what end, then, a conference of teachers from three countries gathered for a week at the University of York in England?

The sponsoring groups—NCTE, NLA, NATE(England), and CCTE(Canada)—and the conference planning committee envisioned York as a follow-up to the Dartmouth Seminar of 1966, sort of a five-years-after review of the state of teaching English. Instead of a small group of fifty such as met at Dartmouth, they increased the number of participants and included more classroom teachers, publishers, media specialists, etc. These 450 participants were divided into six commissions, each dealing with a different aspect of English teaching. Commission I looked at "English in the School 11-18"; Commission II at "English in Operation: Chance, Choice, or Program in the Secondary School"; Commission III at "The Teacher's Concern with Language and Learning in the Primary/Elementary School"; Commission IV at "English for the Young Adult"; Commission V at "The Place of Drama in the Teaching and Learning of English"; and Commission VI at "English and Curriculum Change."

At this time a complete and accurate account of what transpired is impossible. Perhaps it will never be possible. York meant something different to each of the people who attended, and no summary statement could possibly please everyone who was there. The best we can offer is a condensation of our personal impressions, observations and conclusions based primarily on the workings of Commission I of which we were members.

In the title of his address to the opening plenary session James

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Squire identified two of the central issues to which the participants addressed themselves. In heading his remarks, "Freedom and Control—the Scylla and Charybdis of Language Learning," Squire anticipated the debate which developed between the advocates of a highly structured curriculum and those who favor a completely unstructured program. He also pinpointed the participants' recognition of language learning as the central task of the English class.

In the course of debating the question of how much structure is necessary or possible in language learning most participants came to realize, slowly and sometimes painfully, that a middle position was the only viable one. They became aware that the question was not so much one of a structured or unstructured curriculum, but of which kinds of language learning require preplanned sequence and order and which kinds occur best in an environment conducive to freedom and spontaneity. The task, they realized, was to discover theoretical bases for making decisions about the relationship of particular language activities to the need for freedom or control.

To most Americans trained to think of the English curriculum as a tripod this task was doubly difficult. The American concept of language as that part of the English curriculum, somehow divorced from literature and composition and dealing with syntax, usage, spelling, lexicography, etc., had to be modified and expanded before easy communication with language-oriented British colleagues was possible.

To most of the British participants all of the activities common to the English classroom—writing, talking, reading—are aspects of the symbol system called language. Whatever else literature may do as a humanizing force, it remains one mode of expression, created by language users, interpreted and internalized by other language users. Not that the writers of those forms of language which we call novels, plays, poems are mere message-senders, but that these forms are part of that complex and intricate pattern of verbal interchange which constitutes our language environment. For the British the English classroom is the place where the student learns to understand, cope with, and eventually manipulate to his own advantage this language environment.

American participants who came to York perceiving only a casual relationship between language, literature, and composition began to realize during the week how this view severely restricted possibilities for student growth. On the other hand, British participants came to see that their preoccupation with the language of personal expression imposed restrictions of a different sort. As one British teacher remarked, "If two pieces of writing come in—one of them mechanically correct, precise, and in full conformance with accepted standards, the other rife with misspellings, fragmented sentences, and socially unacceptable language—the second will draw the unquestioning approval of many British English teachers as being more 'creative,' 'honest,' and 'expressive.' What we have here is a sort of reverse elitism."

With their newly expanded shared understanding of the meaning of "language" and the problems of language learning, the Americans and British began the major, nearly staggering, task of investigating theoretical frameworks for organizing effective language-centered English programs. Obviously, in the brief time available to them they were unable to discover or construct any one model that was totally satisfactory. However, in exploring the work of developmental psychologists, linguists, and curriculum theorists, they became increasingly convinced that intensive work toward the construction of such a model is of primary and immediate importance. Those in Commission I who addressed themselves to this problem concluded that any such model must in essence be a synthesis of communications theory and existing knowledge of patterns of growth and development.

However, the participants did not devote all their energies to the pursuit of theoretical solutions to long-range problems. In the course of the week they considered questions as specific as the duties of department chairmen and methods for initiating improvised drama. Surprisingly, on many questions that still engender heated debate at American conferences there was almost instant and unanimous agreement.

For example:

There were no hang-ups on the teaching of formal gram-

mar; everyone agreed that it shouldn't be.

With the exception of a few die-hard lit-crit advocates, everyone agreed the time has come to destroy the sacred-cow image of literature. Literature is too important and too powerful to be worshipped rather than used, and the English teacher's job extends far beyond initiating students into the secret ways of literary critics.

All media, all forms of communication, are the stuff of English, not just the printed bits.

English is the use of language and the study of language in use, not sterile analysis of old specimens of frozen discourse.

Grades, marks, examinations are anathema, whether teacher-made or inflicted by external agents.

Failing to provide a challenging and stimulating environment in the name of promoting individual growth is as disastrous as attempting to force-fit all students into the same mold in the name of standards.

The influence of social change, cultural attitudes, racial and class distinctions on education was assumed in nearly all discussions at the conference. However, one group felt so strongly that consideration of this influence should be the primary concern of the conference that they formed a seventh commission on this topic at mid-week. The efforts of this new commission to confront these basic social and political questions effectively sharpened the thinking and increased the awareness of other commissions.

Significantly, few of the debates and discussions at York polarized along national lines. Whatever opposing viewpoints developed reflected conflicting philosophies rather than divisions based on cultural differences. With the possible exception of the different interpretations of the term "language," it would be difficult to identify an American, or English, or Canadian position on any of the questions discussed. Most often there were as many Britons and North Americans on one side of an issue as on the other.

Apparently the Dartmouth-inspired notion of a British educational paradise was dispelled for most Americans at York. Since

1966 the thinking in this country has moved from a subject-centered, "discipline" concept of English toward a student-centered, "growth" concept, bringing us much closer to the British position of five years ago. It was also apparent, however, that movement in this direction has not solved all our problems—nor produced absolute harmony among teachers. English teachers on both sides of the Atlantic are still faced with a staggering and potentially devisive array of difficult questions, although questions of an entirely different order from those which occupied them a few years ago. Instead of asking what books at what grade level will give students an understanding of the structure of the discipline, they are inclined now to ask what activities at what age level are likely to promote personal growth and language awareness? Instead of what is English, they ask what is growth? Instead of what is the structure of the discipline, they wonder what, if any, is the appropriate structure for the classroom?

In short, once it is agreed—as it was by most of the participants at York—that qualities such as freedom of student choice, shared learning experiences, teacher guidance rather than teacher direction, emphasis on learning rather than teaching, and a vastly increased range of "acceptable" materials and activities are characteristics of a desirable English program, the problems of specification and implementation remain. What, for example, is the role of the teacher in an open classroom? If not an authority figure but a guide, what does guidance mean? If not a writer of syllabuses but an aid to the ordering of student experiences, what does ordering experiences mean? Similar questions crowd in upon all the generalizations and high-level abstractions teachers tend to make about "open" education (whatever *that* means).

York was an important first step toward the identification and clarification of these problems shared by all concerned with the teaching of English. In the coming months publications produced by the various commissions will detail more specifically the directions suggested by the work begun at the conference. However, these publications will be at best a base on which to build. Anyone expecting neatly bound solutions to the problems facing us is certain

to be disappointed. But those who are willing to see the process of teaching English as a changing, vibrant, on-going enterprise will find valuable support in the materials spawned at York. If questions have not been answered, at least they have been raised clearly and specifically. If problems have not been solved, at least they have been thrust at us forcefully. The task remaining, and it is a huge task, is to find answers to these questions and solutions to these problems. If we fail at this task, as we have failed at similar tasks in the past, York will have been but another in a series of interesting conferences, socially stimulating and professionally barren.